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SUBJECT: THE U.S.-IRAQI RELATIONSHIP IN 2009: THE VIEW FROM
THE PROVINCES

REF: A. BAGHDAD 519
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 507

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Provincial-level contacts throughout Iraq, while excited about the prospect of full Iraqi sovereignty, hope and expect that the U.S. will continue to provide development and security assistance and maintain a role in internal dispute resolution over the next year. The U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement (SA) enjoys wide support among Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) contacts, including many affiliated with parties who voted against it in parliament. Few Iraqis know about the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), but they have rising expectations for favorable bilateral economic, educational, and scientific relationships. While increasingly confident about their ability to handle upcoming national elections, most Iraqis, especially Kurds, believe a strong U.S. presence during 2009-2010 elections is essential. Few express specific ideas about what the U.S. should prioritize in the next six months. Sunni and Shi'a show similar expectations for the U.S.-Iraq bilateral relationship, while Kurds are much more focused on using U.S. influence to help resolve internal boundary disputes and its relationship with the central government. Iraqis have not yet entirely realized that we will be reducing our military presence quickly, and it will be difficult to manage the expectations of those who expect a greater U.S. role in providing basic services. End summary.

Security Agreement Broadly Supported

[1](#)2. (C) PRT meetings with leading Iraqi contacts carried out during late February indicate strong support for the SA among Iraqi professionals, elected officials, religious authorities and tribal leaders. While PRT contact samplings are admittedly self-selecting and biased toward the relatively moderate, nationalist, and pro-American, many emphasize that the hard-fought SA negotiating process went a long way to relieve their concerns -- and broader Iraqi worries -- about the agreement. Najaf Governor Abu Gelal (ISCI) told Senior Advisor Gray that "several U.S. concessions" were needed to gain SA support from the maraj'iyah and the Shi'a political establishment (ref B). An independent Shi'a COR member from Karbala who wavered before voting for the SA recently told poloff that he is much more confident about his vote now. "People don't know what concessions we gained from the Americans. I don't even know everything. But they know we were able to make changes, especially on immunities, and people take pride in that." Kurdish support for the SA is also strong, but most wish the U.S. had made fewer concessions and had agreed to stay longer.

13. (C) Sunni and Sadrists contacts also expressed support for, or at least acquiescence in, the SA, despite their reservations with the Prime Minister and/or the U.S. Sunni sheikhs and former Baathist military officers in the outer Baghdad communities of Tarmiyah, Tayi and Abu Ghraib told the ePRT recently that they expect Sunni support levels will be very high if/when a referendum on the SA is held this year. Like other Sunnis, they hope the U.S. will apply pressure on the GOI for reinstatement of qualified officers as part of the political reform amendment that passed in parliament alongside the SA. Basra Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) representative Sheikh Mohamed al-Furaji, in sentiments echoing other Sadrists, did not endorse the SA but told the REO that it created needed space for reform and training of QREO that it created needed space for reform and training of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Furaji also focused on reconciliation of former Baathists as a means of professionalizing the ISF. Sunnis and Sadrists expressed a common theme shared by virtually all Iraqis: U.S. partnership with Iraq under the SA must focus on preparing the country to secure its borders with Iran and, to a lesser extent, Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Strategic Framework Agreement Unknown

14. (SBU) In contrast to the SA, the SFA is virtually unknown among Iraqis and more needs to be done to inform both elected officials and the general public about the agreement so that appropriate partnerships can be developed. Iraqis nevertheless have strongly-held ideas about specific topics outlined in the SFA, including economic/energy and educational cooperation. Access to American post-secondary education is a particularly high priority among educated Iraqis. As our bilateral relationship normalizes, PRTs

report more complaints from Iraqis about a related issue mentioned in the SFA: the need to facilitate visa applications for educational and cultural exchanges.

15. (C) Some provincial leaders, such as current Anbar Governor Ma'amoun Sami Rasheed, are already familiar with the priorities and programs detailed under the SFA. Ma'amoun himself participated in the International Visitors program in 2007, and upon return has pressed for greater cooperation with Texas A&M University in the fields of agriculture and engineering. He has expressed clear ideas on a range of USAID programs and about the potential American role in promoting trade and expediting exploration of Anbari natural gas fields. Unfortunately, most local leaders are not as well-informed as Governor Ma'amoun about the range of tools available under the scope of the SFA. Tribal leaders, in particular, are accustomed to military assistance programs and not well informed about civilian goals, programs and initiatives. This lack of knowledge, combined with the considerable turnover created by the recent provincial elections, presents opportunities for us to build relationships with Iraq's emerging local leaders, most of whom will be looking for SFA-focused civilian assistance as they move into a governing role.

Assistance, Dispute Resolution, Consultation

16. (SBU) With regard to economic and energy cooperation, Iraqis have not reconciled their expectations with the reality that the U.S. will be reducing its military presence soon. From poor Shi'a communities in Maysan to relatively affluent Kurdish communities in Irbil and Kirkuk, contacts regularly ask for U.S. assistance in big-ticket infrastructure projects, including electricity, oil refining, road, and telecommunications upgrades. While these requests may be bargaining ploys rather than a reflection of true expectations, many strongly believe that the U.S. has an obligation to build Iraq's infrastructure before departing. Foreign investment is considered crucial -- to the point that Anbar Provincial Chief of Police MG Tariq Yousel al-Thiyabi

told the PRT that "trade is more important than security." However, specific economic goals outlined in the SFA -- such as Iraqi membership in the WTO and access to the Export-Import Bank programs -- are unknown, esoteric issues to all but a few officials, businessmen, and academics.

¶7. (C) While taking pride in greater sovereignty, many Iraqis see a U.S. role for mediating internal disputes as part of future bilateral political and diplomatic cooperation. Kurds are especially eager for the U.S. to be a strong intermediary, hoping that the American emphasis on maintaining a united but federal Iraq will lead us to pressure Prime Minister Maliki to accept concessions to the Kurds on key issues related to internal boundaries, federalism, and Kirkuk. Shi'a and especially Sunni are less enthused about a strong U.S. role on Arab-Kurdish issues; many contacts, such as Salah-ad-Din Turkoman PC member Ali Hashim, have complained in SFA-related discussions about our alleged pro-Kurd bias as a mediator.

¶8. (C) Sunni and Shi'a are much more welcoming of mediation on non-Kurdish issues, however. Local notables in Babil, Diwaniyah, and Dhi Qar provinces, all formerly run by the recently-defeated ISCI party and its Badr militia, have expressed the need for the U.S. to maintain communication with ISCI/Badr so that it does not backslide toward intra-Shi'a violence. Sunni contacts in Baghdad and Anbar have also made clear that Sons of Iraq transition, fair Qhave also made clear that Sons of Iraq transition, fair treatment of internally displaced persons, and Baathist reconciliation require some degree of American managing and intermediation. While Sunnis are frustrated by the rise of PM Maliki, we are not hearing from contacts about any potential for renewed Shi'a-Sunni violence.

¶9. (SBU) On key SA implementation issues, Iraqis are increasingly vocal about requiring consultation and notification before the U.S. moves forward with decisions. While provincial leaders praised the U.S. for its consultation at the local level, many contacts expressed doubt that the same occurs at the national level. Shi'a contacts consistently repeated that the U.S. will need to consult with Prime Minister Maliki about the details of its upcoming American military troop reduction plans. Sunni contacts of ePRT Fallujah, still bitter about unfulfilledQ~0EDk\}UBqRQ"hjTQXbpjK|Z|ws on many points, Kurds, Turkomen and Sunni Arabs in Kirkuk and Mosul all expressed desire for a strong U.S. voice on issues related to Article 23 and 140. Representatives from all these groups stated that a robust U.S. presence will be needed until at least 2011, and that the U.S. must play a role in facilitating provincial and national elections. Kirkuk Turkomen Bloc member Dr. Torhan Mudhir Mufti and several Arab and Turkomen district council members also emphasized to the PRT the need for the U.S. to provide training on Provincial Powers Law (PPL) implementation and the need to apply pressure on the central government to apply the PPL properly.

Regional Feedback and Priorities: South

¶12. (C) Southern Shi'a Iraqis, with fewer pressing security-related or sectarian issues to worry about, are generally more sanguine about Iraqi ability to manage upcoming national elections, PPL implementation, and security concerns without U.S. troop presence. Though generally suspicious of U.S. motives with regard to Arab-Kurdish issues, representatives from all the major Shi'a parties have recently told PRTs that some U.S. backstopping is helpful in managing intra-Shi'a tensions. (Contacts from Karbala and Basra also noted that the U.S. presence would discourage a vote in parliament or even a coup attempt against Maliki.) Leaders in Southern Iraq are still very worried about Iranian influence, and believe U.S. troops will pull out of Iraq before the ISF are ready to stand on their own. While all contacts (including Sadrists politicians) appreciate technical assistance to the ISF, we hear differing views on how

Americans should intervene with an ISF widely viewed as politicized. In an oft-heard sentiment, Basra independent PC member Seyid Ahmed Jamal Deen called for the U.S. to support efforts by the Prime Minister to purge the ISF of Badr and militia-friendly elements. Others, especially ISCI-affiliated leaders in the south central region, called on the U.S. to apply pressure on the Prime Minister to take a less active role in appointing ISF leaders.

¶13. (SBU) While reasonably confident about their ability to handle security and elections, southern Iraqis are particularly adamant that the U.S. has a responsibility to fix Iraq's shattered infrastructure. Some contacts frame Qfix Iraq's shattered infrastructure. Some contacts frame their requests in a way that suggests partnership, such as one Karbala judge who called for establishment of a joint U.S.-Iraqi-funded technical/engineering "consultancy," which could facilitate technology transfer. Others, especially in poor provinces such as Maysan and Dhi Qar, continue to ask the PRTs and USAID for increased assistance on big-ticket items when funding is simply not forthcoming (ref A). Several PRTs report that local officials expect the PRTs to last beyond 2011. While requests of this nature may reflect bargaining positions rather than real aspirations, southern journalists and politicians advise the perceived lack of American delivery on services may be damaging to our interests. Basra ISF and PC contacts, in particular, stated that militias would attempt to regroup as U.S. forces prepare to leave, and that lack of services would be their prime organizing tool.

Regional Feedback and Priorities: Center and Baghdad

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¶10. (C) Among Iraqis, Kurds not only express the strongest desire for a muscular U.S. role in Iraq but also specify most clearly what they think our priorities should be. In an answer widely reflective of Kurdish sentiment, KDP Kirkuk Provincial Council member Sherzad Adil (KDP) listed four areas in which the U.S. should place its emphasis: 1) resolving the federal structure within Iraq, by which he means brokering a shared GOI-KRG agreement on the relationship of the central government and the Kurdish Region; 2) resolving Kirkuk and the other disputed internal boundaries areas consistent with Article 140 of the constitution; 3) resolving tensions between the Iraqi Army and the Peshmerga over who has the right to conduct operations in specific parts of northern Iraq; and 4) promoting progress between the KRG and Baghdad on key economic issues currently in negotiation, chiefly hydrocarbons and government revenue. Article 140 and Article 23 concerns are of such importance to Kurds that it was difficult for PRTs to elicit any opinions from them on other aspects of the SFA. On economic matters, most Kurds emphasized U.S. help in modernizing electrical plants, oil facilities, and other infrastructure.

¶11. (SBU) While holding opposing views on many points, Kurds, Turkomen and Sunni Arabs in Kirkuk and Mosul all expressed desire for a strong U.S. voice on issues related to Article 23 and 140. Representatives from all these groups stated that a robust U.S. presence will be needed until at least 2011, and that the U.S. must play a role in facilitating provincial and national elections. Kirkuk Turkomen Bloc member Dr. Torhan Mudhir Mufti and several Arab and Turkomen district council members also emphasized to the PRT the need for the U.S. to provide training on Provincial Powers Law (PPL) implementation and the need to apply pressure on the central government to apply the PPL properly.

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American drawdown, as exemplified by Salah-ad-Din Deputy Governor Abdullah Hussein Jebara's (Sunni, ex-Baathist) call for U.S. military presence to last until one year after the national elections. Contacts note ongoing security needs in Sunni and mixed areas. Outgoing Anbar Deputy PC Chairman Khamees Abtan reiterated support for U.S. military presence in the province in order to prevent tribal influence over the police from erupting into acts of inter-tribal violence. Police training and rule-of-law programs also received high priority. When asked about the U.S.-Iraqi bilateral relationship, many Sunnis turned immediately to discussion of the Arab-Kurdish topic and the need for the U.S. to support national Iraqi unity. Former Baathists in Anbar, SaD, and Baghdad, focused on Iranian influence and their own reintegration into the ISF, consistently expressed support for the SA. Sunni and Shi'a representatives from these provinces said the U.S. must be active in ensuring both fair national elections and proper application of the PPL.

¶15. (SBU) As elsewhere, local knowledge about the SFA in the central provinces is very low -- though the Da'wa representative in Tuz (Salah-ad-Din Province) was well aware of the SFA and showed the PRT 1,000 copies of the agreement he had ready to distribute. Knowledgeable of the SFA or not,

PRT contacts have expressed ideas about the type of economic, cultural, and education initiatives envisioned within its scope. Anbari business leaders believe that Iraq's biggest challenge for the next five years will be rebuilding its infrastructure. They have proposed to the PRT a "Marshall Plan" for development projects, including debt forgiveness by Iraq's creditors. Economics professors at Anbar University say that they look forward to normal relations with the U.S., meaning easy access to visas, conventional commercial ties, correspondent relations between U.S. and Iraq banks, and access to Ex-Im credits and USDA commodity-export programs. In general, they want to emulate what they perceive to be the more developed economic policies of the Kurdish Regional Authority. Contacts also cited the need for trade-credit facilities to relevant Iraqi banks, pointing to GOI arrangements with Iran, Syria, China, and Turkey as examples.

Next Six Months

¶16. (SBU) Iraqis express strong opinions about our bilateral relationship but rarely offer specific answers to questions about what U.S. priorities should be in the next six months. Provincial contacts universally believe that the U.S. needs to remain in Iraq through national and sub-provincial elections in order to manage conflicts, but (outside of the Kirkuk issue) rarely give advice on how the U.S. should approach upcoming elections from a policy perspective. The expectation is for American backstopping and facilitation, not American direction. While few know of the SFA, there is near unanimous sentiment for the U.S. to pursue the type of increased cooperation outlined in the agreement, and satisfaction upon hearing of specific bilateral mechanisms that will be developed to start implementing it this year. In upcoming months, PRTs will be planning conferences to spread awareness of the SFA. If Joint Coordination Committees can be established and tangible goods under the SFA can be delivered in first six months -- such as educational exchanges and removal of some Chapter 7 obligations -- the public relations benefit would be significant.

Comment

¶17. (C) As Iraq assumes greater sovereignty, its people have grown more comfortable with the idea of a temporary American presence to provide background support in security, development assistance, and management of internal political issues. While sampling of opinion through PRTs can be biased, it is evident that Iraqi anxieties about our impending departure are rising, a sentiment shared by our national leadership contacts. Most provincial contacts believe that the U.S. has a continuing role to play in Iraq to help resolve outstanding issues that relate to them (such as SOI integration for Sunnis). Sunni and Shi'a Arabs are much less comfortable with American mediation on Kurdish-Arab disputes, although they are coming to realize that Kurdish-Arab issues have the potential to destabilize the country, especially during an election year. Sunni and Shi'a do not see their own pet issues, such as de-Baathification, as related to resolution of Kurdish-Arab debate. As we work in 2009 to develop the bilateral U.S.-Iraqi relationship through SFA implementation and support to upcoming national elections, great care will need to be taken to manage Arab and Kurdish expectations as we build toward establishing durable solutions to internal political issues. End comment.
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